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I'LL TAKE MY STAND: THE RELEVANCE OF THE AGRARIAN VISION

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In the winter of 1781-82, Thomas Jefferson wrote his *Notes on the State of Virginia* as a series of "Queries" examining in detail the quality of life in his region. One of the most famous of the queries is Number XIX, which contains the remark that "Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue." "Let our work-shops remain in Europe," he adds. Yet Jefferson was very much aware as he wrote that his countrymen found industrial and commercial careers attractive; they had "transferred" to themselves, he remarked, the "European" economic principle that "every state should endeavor to manufacture for itself . . ." (164). It was only after admitting this economic fact of life of his nation that Jefferson, in a very different strain, launched his praise of the husbandman. And it is essential to recognize that as he did so, Jefferson abandoned the pretext of speaking as a political economist charting the country's course and became decidedly a moral philosopher who based his preference for farming not on eco-

conomic realities but on the spiritual superiority of the endeavor.

In 1930, this Jeffersonian strategy was invoked for one last time to provide an image of rebuke for a group of Southern Americans profoundly disturbed by the lack of humane values operating in their world. *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* was written for a "cause"; one of the book's contributors, Donald Davidson, called it "the cause of civilized society, as we have known it in the Western World, against the new barbarism of science and technology controlled and directed by the modern power state." Yet it was also, as the book's title indicated, a cause defined in Southern terms, using "twelve Southerners' " ideas of an agrarian South to project essentially the same vision of the good life that Jefferson had defined.

Of the twelve Southerners who wrote essays for *I'll Take My Stand*, four had been members of the group of student and teacher poets at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, who became known as "the Fugitives" through the magazine by that name which they published from 1922 to 1925. Donald Davidson, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren went their separate ways during the later 1920's but corresponded and met frequently, drawn together by similar Southern loyalties and, more importantly, by similar attachment to artistic principles that included the belief that a society operating by agrarian standards was in every way superior to the industrial culture that prevailed in the United States. From 1925 on, events such as the Scopes trial at Dayton, Tennessee, dramatized for these men, as Davidson put it, "how difficult it was to be a Southerner in the twentieth century, and how much more difficult to be a Southerner and also a writer."

In a July 1929 letter to Allen Tate, who was studying in France on a Guggenheim fellowship, Davidson outlined a plan for a symposium on the South and its relation to the rest of the country that he and John Crowe Ransom had tentatively discussed. The "project" would take the form of

a collection of views on the South It would deal with phases of the situation such as the Southern tradition, politics, religion, art, etc., but always with a strong bias toward the self-determinative principle. It would be written by native Southerners of our mind—a small, coherent, highly selected group, and would be intended to come upon the scene with as much vigor as is possible—would even, maybe, call for *action* as well as ideas.

Tate replied immediately and enthusiastically and supplied a list of suggestions for contributors and subjects as well as a sense of urgency; the “project” went forward rapidly, and the twelve essays, with an anonymous “Statement of Principles” placed at the beginning as an introduction, were published late in 1930 as *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*.

I’ll Take My Stand was intended to constitute only one phase of a larger Agrarian program that would include such other outlets as an academy and a magazine. The four Fugitive-Agrarians published many articles on the subject during the 1930’s; they participated in debates with “progressivists” and in 1936 contributed to another agrarian symposium, *Who Owns America?* Still, *I’ll Take My Stand* remains the definitive statement of their position and marks the last time that they stood fully united on the issue. By 1940 their artistic callings had taken them beyond the literal “cause” of preserving, for the South if not for Western civilization itself, an agrarian way of life.

In 1945 John Crowe Ransom acknowledged the inadequacy of the Agrarians’ stand as a practical program for returning America to the simpler, better agricultural standards:

I find an irony at my expense in remarking that the judgment just delivered by the Declaration of Potsdam against the German people is that they shall return to an agrarian economy. Once I should have thought there could have been no greater happiness for a people, but now I have no difficulty in seeing it for what it is meant to be: a heavy punishment. Technically it might be said to be an inhuman punishment, in the case

where the people in the natural course of things have left the garden far behind.

The question, then, is this: of what value could the Nashville group's thesis be to a people who had "left the garden far behind"? Would their argument serve no better purpose than to offer up ironies concerning a road not taken? Once the garden has been left behind, does the idealistic contemplation of it, even in art, become much more than a symptom of a neurotic urge to escape what lies ahead of the garden?

In the opening essay of *I'll Take My Stand*, Ransom raised the hope that the book's advocacy of the Old South as garden might have at least the power to "bear a barb and inflict a sting" (1). Clearly, the Agrarians expected their espousal of an Agrarian program, rendered through a poetic vision of the Old South, to increase perception concerning the problems of living in a modern technological society. As a social document, *I'll Take My Stand* has often been denied this function because of its shaky grasp of the practical matters of farming and also because of its notable inaccuracies and omissions concerning the way life in the Old South was actually lived.

Yet the book's importance in the final analysis has little to do with economics or even exclusively with the South, old or new. It was directed to a universal, timeless quest for a stable, harmonious, spiritually rewarding design for existence. The authors' introduction to *I'll Take My Stand* put it this way: "Proper living is a matter of the intelligence and the will, does not depend on the local climate or geography, and is capable of a definition which is general and not Southern at all" (xxi). To define what should constitute "proper living" generally through the use of the pre-industrial South as mythic model was the purpose of *I'll Take My Stand*, and it is in such terms that it must be measured.

The opening paragraph of the first essay of *I'll Take My Stand* set the standard for the book as a whole. John Crowe Ransom described there the "unreconstructed Southerner" clinging persistently to a group of principles that he associ-

ated with the South. "It is out of fashion these days to look backward rather than forward," began Ransom. "About the only American given to it is some unreconstructed Southerner, who persists in his regard for a certain terrain, a certain history, and a certain inherited way of living" (1). Ransom thus defined the South's unique position in America in terms of three specific qualities that the region had maintained in contradistinction to the rest of the country: a certain terrain, a certain history, a certain inherited way of living. An examination of these three agrarian assets of Southern culture as they are exhibited in *I'll Take My Stand* might reveal the reason that the book itself remains as an important source of knowledge concerning the dilemmas of modern man. Further, to see how the Agrarians defined the "good life" of the South in these essays is to reach toward a fuller understanding of the literature of the modern South that has gained a central place in American culture.

Part One: A Certain Terrain

For most Southern writers before the 20th century, "placing" the South's terrain, identifying the nature of it in the mythic sense, particularly, was a fairly uncomplicated matter. The South as an image of earth was Arcadia, the good land. A Thomas Nelson Page or a Joel Chandler Harris could view his world largely without the double focus we find in more recent literature. The New South might threaten, but the writers who constructed the plantation ideal in the 1880's and 90's were still confident in the relevance of the values of the Old South: Thomas Nelson Page would insist that "the New South is, in fact, simply the Old South with its energies directed into new lines."

Such a singular faith in the continuity of place as Page exhibited in all his pronouncements on the Old South is not possible for the modern Southern writer. Robert Penn Warren has helped to explain why in a *Paris Review* interview: "After 1918 the modern industrial world, with its good and bad, hit the South; all sorts of ferments began. As for individual

writers, almost all of them of that period had had some important experience outside the South, then returned there—some strange mixture of continuity and discontinuity in their experience—a jagged quality.” Yet Warren also stated, in the same interview, “It never crossed my mind when I began writing fiction that I could write about anything except life in the South. . . . Nothing else ever nagged you enough to stir the imagination.”

The “strange mixture of continuity and discontinuity” that Warren defines as a quality of the modern Southern writer’s experience provides one important insight into the attitude toward place or “terrain” that permeates the Agrarian argument of *I’ll Take My Stand*. The modern Southerner—the Agrarian included—had grown away from his region, and the South which he recovered in his mapping of a myth for it was a different place from any that had ever actually existed. The South as terrain which was evoked in *I’ll Take My Stand* was able to provide first and foremost the sense of *continuity* that life in the real world, both Southern and American, lacked. It became a bulwark against time and change, a haven built upon and also built to protect the simple, the concrete, the natural texture that life ought to have.

Andrew Nelson Lytle, one of the “12 Southerners” appearing in *I’ll Take My Stand*, wrote in a later essay that “the defense against the evil within and without begins in a structure of a stable society. [Man] must have location which means property, which means the family and the communion of families which is the state. . . . Without control of space he is lost in time.” In his *I’ll Take My Stand* essay, “The Hind Tit,” Lytle promoted the gospel of place as the salvation of modern man lost in time. In this modern paeon to Southern farm life, Lytle constructed the image of the Jeffersonian yeoman embattled against the industrial system. “The most difficult task industrialism has undertaken,” Lytle claimed, was “to convince the farmer that it is time, not space, which has value.” The reason this task would be so difficult is that “the farmer knows he cannot control time, whereas he can wrestle with

space, or at least with that particular part which is his orbit" (211-12).

The word "control" was the key to Lytle's reverence for place. As he remained close to the land, the farmer could identify himself with nature and with natural processes. With a self-discipline of which only the strong are capable, he could accept the limits imposed by nature—limits which he could define, work within, "wrestle with," as Lytle put it; thus he was actually unlimited in his possibilities for truly valuable action, because from the first he designed his actions according to the tangible, the physical, the knowable. To be allied with nature would be to acknowledge only the limitation of being fully, purely human and the necessity for having roots in the land.

Order prevails in Lytle's vision of the Southern homestead: stability and whimsy are balanced in the arrangement of rooms and furnishings. What modern conveniences there are have "added to the order of the establishment's life without disturbing it" (219). Cooking, milking, churning, wood-chopping, plowing are folk arts in the same class with square-dancing and fiddling. The farmer's work as well as his games are arts that come from the soil so that all of his activities endow the farmer's life with a sense of process and variety attuned to nature itself.

The farmer made in the agrarian image makes living into an art—he alone has the leisure and the insight into nature that are necessary to evolve the art of living. Donald Davidson extended this suggestion of "The Hind Tit" in his *I'll Take My Stand* essay, "A Mirror for Artists," where he affirmed that "only in an agrarian society does there remain much hope of a balanced life, where the arts are not luxuries to be purchased but belong as a matter of course in the routine of his living" (51-52). Looking at the artistic products that the South had produced out of its agrarian environment, Davidson was forced to confess that it "did not produce much 'great' art" (54). He found himself having to define "art" in a wider "social sense," and to judge the work of art not in terms

of its isolated qualities but in terms of the extent to which it was in harmony with its milieu. Thus he argued that the "real importance" of art is "as a significant and beautiful way of shaping whatever there is to be shaped in life, secular and religious, private and public" (56). And on these grounds, "the South, as a distinct, provincial region, offers terms of life favorable to the arts . . ." (57).

Davidson seemed to find it a matter for pride that, "as the arts have flourished in the South, they have been, up to a very recent time, in excellent harmony with their milieu" (55). Likewise he praised the "provincial artist" who was "far from the commercial fury and the extreme knowingness of the merchandising centers," and he rather mourned the fact that this artist "cannot escape the infection of the cities by mere geographical remoteness" (58). These sentiments are highly ironic when one considers the *art* of Ransom, Tate, and Warren, as well as that of William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, Eudora Welty, and a host of other Southern writers. Their artistic visions of the South were founded not on the "harmonious relation between artist and environment" that Davidson lauded, but on an absolutely essential sense of disharmony growing out of a feeling of detachment from the Southern environment.

Davidson was attempting to formulate a definition of art that would favor his thesis that the South offered an ideal artistic environment because of its agrarian tradition. This mission led him to some serious oversimplifications and omissions; he did, however, pinpoint through his study one definite asset that the Southern writer might gain from his agrarian heritage. In listing the "blessings" that the "provincial artist" enjoyed, Davidson asserted that "especially to his advantage is his nearness to nature in the physical sense—which ought to mean, not that he becomes in the narrow sense an artist of the soil, dealing in the picturesque, but that nature is an eternal balancing factor in his art . . ." (58).

The Agrarians argued the idea of man as a finite being, limited, dependent on some source of strength outside himself.

You have moved often and rarely left an address,
And hear of the deaths of friends with a sly pleasure,
A sense of cleansing and hope, which blossoms from distress;
But it has not died, it comes, its hand childish, unsure,
Clutching the bribe of chocolate
or a toy you used to treasure.

Part Two: A Certain History

In Warren's *All the King's Men*, Jack Burden reaches a decision which is also a commitment: "Reality," he decides, "is not a function of the event as event, but of the relationship of

that event to past, and future, events . . . Direction is all." In "Ode to the Confederate Dead," Allen Tate speaks personally to a man standing at a Confederate cemetery gate: "The brute curiosity of an angel's stare / Turns you, like them, to stone / . . . Till plunged to a heavier world below / You shift your sea-space blindly / Heaving, turning like the blind crab." In an essay on the poem, Tate remarks that the crab is a creature which "has mobility but no direction, energy but no purposeful world to use it in."

Jack Burden learns to relate the present to the past, to accept the effect of the past in determining the future, so that at the end of *All the King's Men* he can resolve that "soon now . . . we shall go out of the house and go into the convulsion of the world, out of history into history and the awful responsibility of Time." The theme of Tate's poem is modern man's *inability* to relate the present to the past: Tate's cemetery gazer, contemplating "the immoderate past," the "inscrutable infantry rising / Demons out of the earth," can only bow his head "with a commercial woe"; he is a "mummy," "smothered" in time. He can ask the question, "What shall we say of the bones, unclean, / Whose verdurous anonymity will grow?" but he cannot answer it. He can even ask the more crucial question, "What shall we say who have knowledge / Carried to the heart?" but can only answer it with a grimmer question, "Shall we take the act / To the grave?"

Stark Young, at the end of his *I'll Take My Stand* essay, rephrased the questions that are the ultimate concern of Tate's poem and Warren's novel when he asked, "What is the end of living?" His answer carried an expression of the Agrarian view of time and of the value of the past:

To arrive, then, at some conception of the end of living, the civilization that will belong to the South, is our great, immediate problem. But in this case, as always in life, alongside a man's open course there moves a mystery, to him dark and shining at once. The mystery here is change, whose god is Mutability. In the shifting relation between ourselves and the new order lies the profoundest source for our living, I mean

change in that almost mystical sense by which, so long as we are alive, we are not the same and yet remain ourselves

That a change is now in course all over the South is plain; and it is as plain that the South changing must be the South still, remembering that for no thing can there be any completeness that is outside its own nature, and no thing for which there is any advance save in its own kind (359)

Thus for Stark Young and the Agrarians generally a man or a culture must, to survive, advance "in its own kind" according to "its own nature," which can be determined only by using as a reference point the past that has shaped its identity in the present. The man brooding over the meaning of history at the Confederate cemetery gate looks upon the heroic, "active" faith represented there as an inscrutable mystery whose meaning will always be unavailable. Time has no meaning for modern man trapped in a present which is cut off from the past, no meaning other than death.

The Southerner, however, might be exempted from this modern trap of time because he possesses "a certain history" that he can look upon not as something unavailable but as a living frame of reference. In his *I'll Take My Stand* essay Allen Tate asserted that Southerners had traditionally given this function to history. The "old southerners," he said, "knew no history for the sake of knowing it, but simply for the sake of contemplating it and seeing in it an image of themselves" (172). What Tate implied here is that history does not relate most deeply as fact, or something to be known, but that it gives its greatest meanings when it relates as definition, something to be held and turned to different lights according to men's search for themselves through their past.

Does such a use of history lead to damaging distortions of truth? In *I'll Take My Stand* many of the essayists seemed to back away from their knowledge of the South's actual past in order to restore a mythical past whose images could dramatize their ideal. Thus Ransom talked in his essay exclusively of an Old South founded on a European social organization that he called a "squirearchy" (14). Lytle ignored the actualities of

life on the small farm in order to render a vision of the perfect agrarian life. Owsley's essay, "The Irrepressible Conflict," defined the Civil War in these terms: "Complex though the factors were which finally caused war, they all grew out of two fundamental differences which existed between the two sections: the North was commercial and industrial, and the South was agrarian" (69). He added that "Slavery . . . was part of the agrarian system but only one element and not an essential one" (73). And Robert Penn Warren, in the "Briar Patch" essay that he later repudiated, made a commentary on the racial situation in the South that was based on old, old stereotypes; he wrote that the "Southern negro has always been a creature of the small town and farm" and that he should stay there since he would be more "likely to find in agricultural and domestic pursuits the happiness that his good nature and easy ways incline him to as an ordinary function of his being" (261).

It is thus demonstrable that the "historical sense" evoked in *I'll Take My Stand* represents not attitudes toward an actual world that existed in the past but attitudes toward a world that reflects a people's sense of who they are according to what they believe to have been the truths their ancestors lived by. One sees that the essayists of *I'll Take My Stand* defined their "certain history" in terms of the needs of their culture, which itself had traditionally seen historical fact as material that must be amenable to realignment according to the closer truth of regional myth.

John Crowe Ransom's interpretation of Southern history is particularly interesting to consider because the use he made of historical images of the past in his *I'll Take My Stand* essay is amplified considerably in his poetry's treatment of some of the same themes. In the essay Ransom proposed the theory that the South "founded and defended a culture which was according to the European principles of culture" (3). What Ransom found in European culture and saw surviving in his image of the Old South was a core of "self-sufficient, backward-looking, intensely provincial communities" committed

to living "routine lives in accordance with the tradition which they inherited" (4-5). It must be the South's present task to preserve somehow her "historic identity" in the face of the threat from "American progressivism" and "to maintain a good deal of her traditional philosophy" (22).

Ransom in his essay worked his argument through a series of cultural dichotomies: Europeanism vs. Americanism, progressivism vs. conservatism, backward-lookers vs. forward-lookers. There was at the beginning of his essay rather a fatalistic tone; only certain "unreconstructed Southerners" were eager to "look backward" in these days, and such a one "feels himself in the American scene as an anachronism . . ." (1). By the end, however, the spirit of sardonic acquiescence to the inevitable had changed to almost a doomsday assertion that the tide had to be turned: "The South at last is to be physically reconstructed; but it will be fatal if the South should conceive it as her duty to be regenerated and get her spirit reborn with a totally different orientation toward life" (202).

Ransom's poetry also works through the display of dichotomies which, as in his essay, usually involve threats to an ideal of order and continuity: chaos is opposed to ritual, confusion to formal faith, cynicism to belief, the rude ignorance of youth to the seasoned wisdom of age. The poems are insistent in their portrayal of the dehumanizing aspects of modern life and the human need for the order that some past time stood for. In "Old Mansion" it is the present that is the "unseemlier world." The modern "intruder" who asks admittance into the old, decaying Southern manor, begging "their dole of a look" or "crumbs of history dropping from their great store," is aware of the disruptive effect of his presence, "exhaling my foreign weed on its weighted air." Yet Ransom the poet sustains his ironic stance as Ransom the essayist could not; Ransom's support of the old world described in his poem is clear, yet his detachment is also very much in evidence. Thus he can describe the "old mansion" with a tone that mocks even while it mourns:

Stability was the character of its rectangle
 Whose line was seen in part and guessed in part
 Through trees. Decay was the tone of old brick and shingle.

Decay matches stability; the mansion, "long and richly inhabited," seems best suited for "grave rites and funerals."

Ransom's "Captain Carpenter," another ironic poem, offers a finely chiseled portrait of a Southern gentleman. Certainly we are called upon to admire the captain's resolve even while we dread his suicidal defense of doomed traditions: "I heard him asking in the grimmest tone / If any enemy yet there was to fight?" the narrator tells us, just after he has shown Captain Carpenter being "parted" from his ears and having his "sweet blue eyes" plucked out. The ironic detachment is there, perhaps as a defense, but nonetheless important as a warning against taking Captain Carpenter's martyrdom too seriously:

The rogue in scarlet and grey soon knew his mind
 He wished to get his trophy and depart
 With gentle apology and touch refined
 He pierced him and produced the Captain's heart.

The poem "Antique Harvesters" honors the hunters, "Keepers of a rite," and the harvesters, garnering the treasure of their fields for "the Lady," yet the praise comes only after the poet has dispassionately clarified the terms on which this commitment to the old order must be made:

... what shall this land produce?
 A meager hill of kernels, a runnel of juice;
 Declension looks from our land, it is old.

The sense of inevitable decline balances the boast of the harvesters. This is the case as well in "Conrad in Twilight," where the delicate praise of an old man's indomitable will is wrenched out of a dry skeptic's assertion of decay: "Conrad, Conrad, aren't you old / to sit so late in your mouldy garden?"

The modern Southern writer seems in a way *compelled* to take up ironically the matter of the past as a pressure on the present. John Crowe Ransom's intruder in "Old Mansion," Allen Tate's man at the cemetery gate, Jack Burden, Quentin Compson, and Eugene Gant all find concrete images of past worlds which haunt them and goad them and finally force them into confrontations with themselves. In *I'll Take My Stand* the essayists did not examine the actual past of the South in the same critical manner, since their purpose was the defense and justification of a mythical way of life that could stand as a rebuke and a corrective to the "prevailing American way." Yet implicit in their defense was a recognition that the South's history was not one of success but one of reverses. The image of pastoral permanence that was evoked for the Old South in *I'll Take My Stand* was ironically predicated upon a sense of man's limitations, upon the assertion that only as man accepts realistic boundaries for himself is he able to maintain a stable, hereditary standard for living. And the Southerner's knowledge of limitation came in large measure from his region's very un-American experience with history.

Part Three: A Certain Inherited Way of Living

Flannery O'Connor, in an essay on "The Regional Writer," tells an amusing anecdote in order to make a serious point about the matter of Southern identity. "I have a friend from Wisconsin," she says, "who moved to Atlanta recently and was sold a house in the suburbs. The man who sold it to her was himself from Massachusetts, and he recommended the property by saying, 'You'll like this neighborhood. There's not a Southerner for two miles.'" Miss O'Connor comments drily, "At least we can be identified when we do occur." Her concern is added in a more somber tone—an Agrarian tone, one might add: "The present state of the South is one wherein nothing can be taken for granted, one in which our identity is obscured and in doubt."

The recognition that the Southerner's sense of identity was "obscured and in doubt" led the Nashville agrarians to try to define if not to stabilize the unique features of that identity in

I'll Take My Stand. The same recognition, Miss O'Connor notes, is what has led to the great flowering of fiction writing in the South in modern times: "because we are losing our customary manners, we are probably overly conscious of them; this seems to be a condition that produces writers."

The Southerner's "inherited way of living" is what is at issue for Miss O'Connor as for the Agrarian. The South that the Agrarians went forth to champion in 1930 had come to that particular crossroads out of which the pastoral impulse asserts itself in literature; the inherited set of manners by which a group of people traditionally had defined themselves was becoming less hereditary, the customs less customary. These manners and customs, as Stark Young felt, could only thrive in a civilization "whose ideal is social existence rather than production, competition, and barter" (ITMS, 342), and the ideal of social existence seemed on the wane in the South, the ideal of production on the rise. An underlying pursuit in many of the *I'll Take My Stand* essays was the quest to uncover the exact nature of and then to defend the "inherited way of living" that had distinguished the Southerner's existence up to modern times.

Stark Young's essay, "Not In Memoriam, But In Defense," dealt specifically with the significance of the concepts upon which the Southerner traditionally based his behavior. He cited that rare attention to "manners" in the South as one of the region's most distinctive features and accounted for them in a way that stressed the social function of life in the Southern community. "Manners and sincerity," he argued, "are matters understood only with reference to a state of society that assumes a group welfare and point of view rather than individual whims, a flow among a group of human beings, a life to which each single human being contributes and in which he lives" (346).

For *I'll Take My Stand*, John Donald Wade's "The Life and Death of Cousin Lucius" might be said to function as a concrete application of the other essays' more generalized assumptions on the ideal agrarian way of living in the South.

The story of Cousin Lucius's life and death was rendered in a gentle, reminiscing tone that itself emphasized the outstanding qualities of this gentleman's existence: he *was* a gentleman, who spent a rich lifetime adhering to principles learned through two sources—his family and his association with the land. No essay in *I'll Take My Stand* demonstrates more effectively the exact nature of the book's cause.

Cousin Lucius was an embattled Agrarian, a Southerner of intellect and sensitivity who found his ideals, ideals that he identified with a uniquely Southern tradition, challenged from within as well as without by the modern lust for the material products of a technological system. Wade described his protagonist's anger as he listened to his young daughter praising everything linked to the "city":

For days after that he went about fortifying himself by his knowledge of history and ancient fable, telling himself that man had immemorially drawn his best strength from the earth that mothered him . . . "But what have history and ancient fable," the fiend whispered, "to do with the present?" (282)

Cousin Lucius, in his own life, found a way to make history and fable have "something to do" with the present. The example of his father, his college training in the classics, and his own "instinct for the mastery of the land" made it impossible for him to follow his friends and neighbors as they abandoned their farms and villages, heading for the industrial fruits of the cities. He became, within his community, a teacher, a farmer, and a banker. Wade, in allowing Cousin Lucius these three dramatically different vocations, was asserting the Agrarian ideal of the farmer as a man interested in, and capable of being effective in, matters of scholarship and economics as well as matters of the land.

Cousin Lucius succeeded as an Agrarian—but his South failed as a region capable of sustaining the Agrarian vision. It is rather remarkable that Wade's was the only essay in *I'll Take My Stand* to dramatize Agrarian principles in terms of the life history of an actual Agrarian, yet it was also the essay

which most dramatically conceded that the Agrarian was an anachronism even in the South which fostered his Agrarian tendencies. Cousin Lucius was positive in his conviction that the industrial program was not suitable for the rural South, that it was "not suitable even for an industrial community if it was made up of human beings as he knew them" (294). But Wade was not able to show Lucius's way of living as one that could be inherited—even Cousin Lucius's children moved to the city, where they "prospered" (according to their lights).

John Donald Wade's Cousin Lucius exemplified the "certain inherited way of living" that the Nashville Agrarians associated with their myth of the preindustrial South. As a farmer mourning the fact that his friends and neighbors were moving to the city, Lucius would be at best a spokesman only for the fatalism that is intrinsic in the pastoral tradition. But Lucius did more than mourn, and so for the Agrarian cause he could symbolize a more positive function than that of being caretaker of a garden left far behind. Lucius asserted that only certain universal human values are durable and therefore hereditary as he denied his neighbor's new faith that "happiness was to go faster and faster on less and less" (292). Lucius "would not concede that we are no better than flaring rockets, and he would never get it into his old-fashioned head that anything less than a complete integrity will serve as a right basis for anything that is intended to mount high and to keep high" (292).

What the Agrarians condemned, as the creed of Cousin Lucius demonstrates, was not the technological system of American society per se, but the general weakening of faith in human dignity and worth that seemed to accompany a society's increasing attachment to the products of a technological system. To them, a man who lived close to the land and who kept his knowledge of his past in active perspective could know himself for what he was and could equip himself to assess properly both limitations and strengths. Cut off from an understanding of nature or an awareness of the past—as modern man in an urban, technological environment was—a hu-

man being could only ask the solipsistic questions posed by Tate's figure by the cemetery gate.

The modern Southern writer has brought into his fictional worlds a special feeling for the Agrarians' assertion of man's need to assess himself according to a system of values more nature- and past-oriented than the one provided by the modern industrial world. The South had traditionally—according to myth—provided such an orientation. Donald Davidson has written that Fugitive poets gathering in the earliest years of that movement “shared pretty much the same assumptions about society, about man, nature and God. And we were most fortunate in not even having to ask ourselves whether or not we were on common ground in such matters. . . . In the South of those days there was a great deal that could be taken for granted.”

Perhaps it is a fortunate thing, for Southern literature at any rate, that Southerners came to need to ask themselves about their “common ground.” Davidson admits that the Fugitives themselves “found that the metaphysical questions would, after all, have to be argued.” In *I'll Take My Stand* twelve Southerners argued these questions with an eloquence and sense of commitment that has enabled their book to define many compelling concerns of modern men in general and modern Southern writers in particular.